

The Rise of Censorship in Afghanistan's Media: A Threat to Press Freedom

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On November 26, 2024, UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR) released a joint report which revealed a staggering 336 human rights violations against media workers. The report documented at least 130 incidents of torture, 256 cases of arbitrary arrests and detention, and at least 75 instances of intimidation.¹ Two days later, on November 28, 2024, in a rare instance, six states including France, Spain, Mexico, Chile, Costa Rica and Luxembourg referred the state of Afghanistan to International Criminal Court (ICC) over human rights violation.² After taking over Afghanistan on August 15, 2021, the Taliban have arrested journalists and suspended media outlets over the grounds of not abiding by the 'nationalist and Islamic principles.' Journalists suspected of going against the directions provided by the regime are put under continuous surveillance. Afghanistan ranks 178 out of 180 on the World Press Freedom Index 2024 which means a very unfavorable media environment for the professionals.³ In 2023, Afghanistan was ranked at the 152nd position which means a deteriorating condition with each passing year of Taliban rule.⁴ The increasing culture of ban on press has undermined the principles of transparency, democracy, free flow of information and accountability which are crucial to free media. This article explores the Taliban's efforts to constrain the freedom of media, direct the narrative and its impact on the press freedom. It also explores the motivation of Taliban 2.0 behind such endeavors.

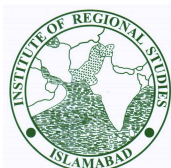
Restrictions on Press Freedom

Throughout the history of Afghanistan, media has been greatly affected due to war torn nature of the country. Journalists have been targeted by warlords, political figures, military,

terrorists and insurgents. Evidently, the democratic governments in the past have done little to protect journalists. According to one source, at least 120 media workers have been killed between the period of 2001 and 2020. Additionally, in the same period, 1550 cases of violence have been registered. Nonetheless, only few cases have been concluded while the rest are still pending.⁵ In one case which took place in April 2018, nine journalists were killed on the same day in the aftermath of twin bombing in Kabul.⁶ The war between different factions of the country over the years to control the information has resulted in the torture and death of many journalists.

Since the Taliban came back to power, a prominent narrative of the group is that the Taliban have been able to restore the security of the country. Therefore, in order to maintain the 'self-projected public narrative,' they have to exert strict control on the media. Beating and detaining journalists in Afghanistan has become the norm. The New York based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reported that the Taliban captured and beat the journalists who were giving coverage to the protests in September 2021.⁷ Additionally, the journalists are not allowed to report any cases of crimes such as robbery, murder and kidnapping. They are also not allowed to report any incident of bombing or explosion. In case of negative reaction of the public to a government official's interview, the Taliban hold the media channel accountable for it. A journalist reported in an interview with a media outlet, 'I interviewed a Taliban member once and after it aired more than 50 Taliban members called me, asking why I didn't remove the part where the cleric smiled.'⁸ According to the reports, only prerecorded sessions are broadcast and any part which might contradict narrative of Taliban is removed.⁹ The media outlets are even forced to change the quotes

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to fit with the government's narratives.¹⁰ In another instance, when Tolo News, a prominent news outlet of Afghanistan, released a report regarding Taliban officials forcing them to stop the broadcast of soap operas, three employers of the news outlet were detained. In September 2024, the Afghan Journalists Center (AFJC) reported that the Taliban have imposed ban on criticizing their policies. Furthermore, the Taliban approved the list of 68 guests who can be invited to the shows to obtain political opinion. The Taliban have to be pre-informed before a TV channel invites a person other than the guest list provided by the Taliban. Allegedly, the journalists are unable to publish even a directly witnessed event in the news out of their own accord. The Taliban's narrative must be incorporated for the story to get published.

The General Directorate of Intelligence (GDI), the Intelligence wing of the Taliban, has directly instructed the media to avoid posting 'false news and baseless rumors.' The warning was announced on January 19, 2022, a few months after Taliban's spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid assured media freedom in the Taliban ruled Afghanistan. The intelligence operations were previously limited to counterterrorism and other security matters. However, in the Taliban regime the focus of intelligence forces has been shifted to domestic affairs such as media surveillance. This not only adversely affects the media freedom but also decreases the efficiency of intelligence forces to fight terrorism.¹¹

Consequences for Women in Media Industry

Soon after taking control of Afghanistan, the Taliban 2.0 held a press conference in which they emphasized over their commitment to uphold the human rights, particularly for women and media. However, as the time passed, citizens witnessed a gradual shift towards radicalized media policies and restriction on women education. The Taliban introduced strict guidelines in September and November 2021, resultantly restricting the women from participating in the media profession.¹²

The Taliban regime has significantly impacted the women's ability to do journalism in

their regime. Women working in media in today's Afghanistan are only allowed to appear on TV if they cover their faces completely. They are allowed work in the presence of female coworkers and interview women only and not the men. While the Taliban completely prohibited women to show their faces on TV, in some provinces they are even prohibited from airing female caller voices.¹³ According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), in the initial four months of Taliban takeover, at least 80 percent of the females working for newspapers, radio and television media outlets lost their job.¹⁴ As Taliban advanced on taking control of Afghanistan, women working in news networks were advised by their colleagues and supervisors to flee the country to save their lives due to uncertain situation. The news outlets, such as Ariana News, a prominent media channel in Afghanistan since 2005, which initially did not discontinue putting female broadcasters on live were forced to do so over threats of complete closing of the whole media outlet by the Taliban military men. Fawzia Wahdat, a female representor working with Ariana News, has told CPJ that the Taliban have claimed that the journalists spent two decades criticizing the Taliban and now they have to payback for their actions.¹⁵

According to Roza Otunbayeva, head of UNAMA, the vague instructions, such as ban on showing living creatures, provided to media industry makes it difficult for the channels to comprehend which matters to report and which to avoid.¹⁶ This highly increases the risk of arbitrary arrests and intimidation. The situation in Afghanistan has compelled many journalists to opt for self-exile. It is reported that the TV channels are also forced to reveal the phone numbers of callers criticizing the government to the state officials.¹⁷ This further compromises the principle of freedom of speech which is an important pillar of democracy. During the past years, the media in Afghanistan had flourished immensely. This is evident from the development of immense network of media channels both public and private. However, the Taliban have closed media outlets such as Noor TV and Barya TV.¹⁸ Since the Taliban takeover, 43 per cent of media outlets have been closed leading to economic loss.¹⁹ The international media also faces

hurdles to operate and report freely. Many independent journalists who are reporting genuinely are doing so over the risk of losing their own lives and the lives of their families.

The Taliban's Promises of Change and the Quest for International Recognition

During the first regime of Taliban back in 1990s, the media and its workers were treated harshly. The Ministry of Information and Culture at that time oversaw the publication of content by newspaper and media. In 1998, an Iranian journalist Seyed Musa was killed for giving coverage to an attack on Hazara community by the Taliban. According to a Human Rights Watch report published in 2001, the Taliban closed down most of the print media and restricted TV and radio just to broadcast prayers and religious programs. A stark contrast between the media strategy of Taliban 1.0 and 2.0 exists in the policy of leveraging it for the propaganda. The Taliban 2.0 are influencing media to project a moderate image of their regime to the international community. Moreover, in all the official statements made by the Taliban, they have emphasized on media freedom and denied any allegation of restricting the media. The Taliban spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid has stated in a news conference that any media outlet is free to publish any news on factual basis. However, the actions of Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, as already discussed, suggest otherwise.²⁰

The attempt by the IEA to promote a positive representation of their regime emanates from their motivation to attain international recognition. The Taliban Supreme leader Haibatullah Akhundzada appealed to the world community to lift economic sanctions from their government and increase the flow of international aid, most of which was cut off when the Taliban took over in August 2021 resulting in humanitarian crisis.²¹ The Taliban 2.0 have also maintained friendly relations with the regional countries and important players including China, Russia and India. The acceptance of the Emirate's ambassadors by China and United Arab Emirates(UAE) in January and August 2024 respectively also serves as a great diplomatic and political achievement for the

country. This also signals towards a *de facto* recognition by countries despite the terrorism factor and Taliban's unwillingness to promote female education.

During the insurgency period between the two Taliban governments, the Taliban have learnt the art of narrative building. This is evident from their increasing presence on social media in the past fifteen years. Taliban have maintained their presence on YouTube since 2009, on Facebook since 2011 and on Instagram since 2016. Prominent Taliban figures have thousands of followers on Twitter (or X). Reportedly, the Taliban hired public relations firms to preach their propaganda via video clips, images and other forms of social media content. The Taliban have also reported increasing security and economic progress via social media to promote a positive image of their regime.²² The difference in actions between Taliban 1.0 and 2.0 is the result of the evolution of the mindset of Taliban regarding propaganda to promote a self-projected public narrative.

Conclusion

The Afghan journalists and the people in general are facing severe restrictions on their freedom of speech. They are prohibited from expressing their opinions openly on any platform including social media and mainstream media. Afghan Taliban are trying to use the media as a spokesperson of their government. In order to protect their own lives, many Afghan male and female journalists have already left the country. Many journalists are still trying to migrate. For those journalists, the international community needs to make the process of resettlement easier, making sure that they are not deported back to their country which might put their lives at risk. The media workers currently residing in Afghanistan face a difficult choice between upholding the right principles of journalism and risking their lives, or compromising professional values and keep their job. When Taliban first took over Afghanistan, it was predicted by many stakeholders that they are more progressive than Taliban 1.0 and will not be imposing strict interpretation of Islam. The Taliban also tried their best to project a moderate image of

their government with progressive element. However, the following years have showed a huge gap between Taliban's promises and actions. Nonetheless, an important dynamic to note here is the increasing efforts that the Taliban are putting to emphasize commitment to free media and freedom

of speech to attain international recognition which was not exercised by Taliban 1.0. Despite the inability to uphold international norms, the geopolitical significance of the country has attracted the regional and international diplomatic visits and projects.

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